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## ***Wanda's* Slowness: Enduring Insignificance**

Elena Gorfinkel

“I like slow paced films. You’ll notice *Wanda* is a very slow paced picture. It was played more or less as an art film, not a commercial film. Not everyone is going to like it.” Barbara Loden, 1974 <sup>1</sup>

“Wanda does not stand for mothers, or for modern women, or for victims. There is no representation. Wanda always comes up absent.” – Dirk Lauwert <sup>2</sup>

This essay considers the place of Barbara Loden’s *Wanda* in film history, seeking to reframe and reposition the film in relation to a genealogy of women’s filmmaking, discourses of “slow cinema,” and the specificity of performance. Scholarship on slow cinema has too often overlooked feminist counter-cinematic traditions in the construction of a lexicon of an aesthetics of deceleration. Existing slow cinema genealogies hew to a canon of largely male filmmakers. How might we reframe the connotations of slow cinema’s import if we retraced some of its aesthetic preoccupations vis-à-vis histories of women’s cinema? *Wanda* exhibits many of the tropes associated with contemporary slow cinema, but without the epic scale deployed by directors in the mode. Thus, *Wanda* must be contended with as an overlooked “minor” cinema of fatigue, seen in aesthetic and political terms. The recovered modernity of the film rests in the way it provides an alternate genealogy of a slowness anchored in female forms of refusal--in passive resistance, meandering drift, a dropping out from social reproduction: in a strike without a name.

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No film more animates a feminist film imaginary than Barbara Loden’s *Wanda* (1970). It is a film about a working-class woman from mining country who abandons her given vocation as wife and mother, and proceeds to drift, eventually fastening herself to a small-time thief, Mr. Dennis, a petty tyrant and malcontent who harnesses

the shiftless Wanda for his own purposes. Seeking bare attachment, the most rudimentary of human needs, she gets enlisted in his script, bidden to act in his drama - to stick up a bank. For the two transient loners, the heist ends badly. Wanda drifts onwards.

Loden's film sits at an uneasy angle to the discourses of women's liberation of its time as well as the demand for "positive" representations that would emerge in early 1970s feminist film criticism. Neither affirmative nor bound to psychological interiority, *Wanda* drew on an aesthetic palette associated as much with the French New Wave, cinema verite, and the independent cinemas of Shirley Clarke and John Cassavetes, as with the energies and formal strategies of underground films – as Loden had expressed a concerted affinity with more experimental work, its "take a camera and film it" ethos<sup>3</sup>. It also seems to advance some of the motifs of dispossession in many of the drifter, road films of the late 1960s and 1970s – *The Rain People* (1969), *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), *Boxcar Bertha* (1972), *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) – but differs considerably from them in its mercurial style and in its unremitting pessimism.

Loden's aesthetic is distinct, set apart from these movements and developments, perhaps due to some combination of her marginality to the industry and her economic independence. The singular historicity of *Wanda*, as the fledgling film of an actor-director-screenwriter, its rough-hewn style and spare precision seems to both instantiate and reinforce the film as a palimpsest of failures, textual and extratextual (despite the film's resounding *critical* successes). Loden's prescience rests in focalizing pressing considerations of labor, gender, and survival, made in advance of two key films of feminist refusal and drift, Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), and Agnes Varda's *San Toit ni Loi* (1985). The gestural specificity of Loden's performance, her habitation within the exhausted life-time of rural Appalachia, its aesthetics of passivity and failure, resonate deeply with tendencies afoot in contemporary cinemas of duration and observation.

The acute figuration of refusal in obstinacy and passivity that Loden's *Wanda* calls forth has remained a difficult kernel for feminist criticism and film theory to digest, especially a critical project rooted in affirmative representations, positive images and a politics of the cinematic apparatus which aims to eradicate social

inequalities. Lauren Rabinowitz talks of the radical uprisings of the era of the “long 1968” in which revolution came in the “public demonstration of a refusal,” and in the revelation of the dependency of image culture on female bodies and the dirty realities of women’s work and care labor, “bringing into view the vomiting pregnant woman, the sink full of dirty dishes, the shitty diapers, as much as it meant revealing women’s erotic desires.”<sup>4</sup> *Wanda*, in contrast, untimely and before its time, channels other strategies of image making and performance, ones bound up in affective presence, in the temporality and phenomenology of granular performance, and in an aesthetic less demonstrative than radically descriptive, the burning cut of exposure.

Critically praised on its release, winning the International Critics Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1970, and subsequently screened at Cannes, *Wanda* was largely forgotten for two decades. It became a curio in the history of women’s filmmaking, infrequently associated with the masculinist developments of New Hollywood. Despite efforts to make another feature-length film, it remained Loden’s only major work before her premature death to breast cancer in 1980 at age 48.<sup>5</sup>

This narrative has made *Wanda* a lodestone, testimony to the challenges of women’s film practice in the U.S. film industry.<sup>6</sup> Such recent feminist and cinephile recuperations of Loden have relied on the frangible historicity of the filmmaker as the manifestation of Wanda, the character, and *Wanda* the minor-yet-major filmic work. The film’s is thus imbued with a time-shifting, mournful, reflexive sense of historicity, which has become part of its textual and extratextual meanings, inscribed in its scenes of reception. Acolytes, critics and scholars have taken on their own processes of “Looking for Barbara Loden.”<sup>7</sup> Feminist cinephiles seek the filmmaker Barbara Loden in the ephemera of her existence, in the traces of her image, charting signs of the Wanda to come in the Loden before *Wanda*, of the traces and divining predisposition towards that gesture, described by Nathalie Leger’s in her *Suite for Barbara Loden* (2012), to tell the story of “a woman telling her own story through that of another woman.”<sup>8</sup>

Loden created the character Wanda from a relayed transcription and reimagining of another woman’s story. Loden read a newspaper article about Alma Malone, collaborator with a male partner in a bank robbery, who when sentenced to twenty years in prison, thanked the judge.<sup>9</sup> Loden described her encounter with the story and the beginning of the script for *Wanda*, “I was fascinated by what kind of girl

would be that passive and numb, so I developed that character.”<sup>10</sup> Wanda Goronski, written into existence in 1962 and emergent on 16mm film in 1970 rose from this composite of realities and imaginings. The ineluctable expression of gratitude for an impending imprisonment, a willful submission to unfreedom and a punitive law, oriented Loden's fascination and provides a tantalizing key to the film, of assent and acquiescence writ large.

### Loden before *Wanda*

Barbara Loden's life story has mesmerized critics and scholars. It is a familiar narrative of overcoming and failure, a contest between a woman's self-determination and her over-determination as woman, as performer, as mistress, wife, mother, blonde, ingénue. Moving to New York City from North Carolina at age 16 with \$100 to her name, Loden in the 1950s worked variously posing for pinups, modeling for story magazines and dancing. While performing at the Copacabana she met her first husband Larry Joachim. She was soon “discovered” by television impresario Ernie Kovacs who cast her in *The Ernie Kovacs Show* as his sidekick in his broadcast experiments. Loden's body served as medium for Kovacs, her material presence the substrate of his special effects. In one bit, Kovacs sawed her in half; in another he performed a novel effects trick in which he was visible literally seeing through Loden's body, his eye telescoping through her forehead. These minor moments of Barbara Loden as subject and as object, her body as medium and pliable material, instrument and prop, seem less incidental when seen through the larger arc of her whole career, an agon with acting as instrumentality. In recollecting on her early career, Loden confessed, “I never wanted to be an actress, I thought they were phony,” yet “what got me started in acting lessons was a need to get over being withdrawn and inhibited.” She also wanted to lose her Southern accent, thus taking many voice lessons.<sup>11</sup>

Loden, while taking acting classes with Method teacher Paul Mann, began to appear in small Broadway and Off-Broadway productions, to some small recognition. Her first and primary film roles were as a supporting player. She was cast by Elia Kazan, whom she first met in 1957, as a distinct personality, a Southern secretary in *Wild River* (1960). Even more notable was her role as the tempestuous flapper Ginny Stamper in Elia Kazan's *Splendour in the Grass* (1961). Perhaps most constitutive

however of her as persona, personality and actor, was Loden's biographical framing as Elia Kazan's partner, first as his mistress and then eventual wife. As Berenice Reynaud chronicles, tracing Loden's presence in Kazan's writing in the absence of other sources, the actress long lived in the outsized shadow of "Hollywood's sacred monster."<sup>12</sup> Loden won a Tony award for her role as Maggie under Kazan's direction in the play *After the Fall* in 1964. The script by playwright Arthur Miller was based on his relationship with the tragic bombshell Marilyn Monroe.

As Berenice Reynaud notes, Loden was frequently *not* chosen for various projects, including Kazan's film adaptation of his novel based on their relationship, *The Arrangement* (1967, novel/1969, film). That role went to Faye Dunaway, who had acted as Loden's understudy in *After the Fall*, fresh off her success in *Bonnie & Clyde* (1968). For *The Swimmer* (1968), she was cast in the role as Burt Lancaster's mistress. A series of disputes led to a change in directors; Loden was excised from the film. Yet interviews and accounts from the time also reveal Loden's stated ambivalence towards acting and Hollywood as industry more broadly, and her habit for declining offers for many roles.<sup>13</sup>

Yet another failed project was Loden's presence as the romantic lead in the shelved Alan Smithee film *Fade In* (1968), released as a TV movie in 1973. As if a foreshadowing, Loden starred as a Hollywood film editor, working on a Western film set in Moab, Utah. She unexpectedly falls in love with a rancher, a young Burt Reynolds. On a date the rancher asks her what she does. Loden's character cheekily replies, "*Can't you tell? I'm an actress, I play tortured women who have been terribly hurt so they drink to forget...*" The film ends with Loden's character leaving Utah, choosing not to pursue her city-country affair, her career too important. A refusal of romance, but nevertheless an inscription of refusal – however faint, yet still in a fiction not her own.

[Fig. 1, Loden in the shelved *Fade-In*, 1968.]

### *Fatigue archive*

On movie memorabilia auction sites, I search for Barbara Loden in press materials, and come upon undated photographic stills. A guess might place them in the late

1950s. The back of each photograph is inscribed, “Barbara Loden, Broadway actress/model.” It is unclear if they are non-professionally produced, but clearly, they were used promotionally in the period when she was studying Method acting. A young Loden, hair short and boyish, is posing in a derelict attic, “bones” bare, drywall exposed. In one, Loden is standing on a stepstool, acting out (or sincerely enacting), reaching for a ceiling beam with a piece of wood. Whose house, whose attic is this, what is the status of her performed labor, and what character is Loden prospectively playing in it? In another, she holds a drawer from a disassembled dresser which sits at her feet. A boiler and pipes snake around her, raw stone walls, as she stands effortful amid junk, arrested in the process of discomfiting labor – a handkerchief peeks out of her back pocket. She is cast in a role that seems off script, a seeming vagabond, neither ingénue nor seductress, outside of a recognizable zone of reproductive labor or spectacular performance.

[Figure 2, Loden Promotional Still, n.d.]

The incongruousness and awkwardness of the photos trouble a relation between the images’ documentary value and their possible promotional pretense, a photographic screen test in the idiom of Method acting. Loden wears dungarees, canvas plimsolls, and striped shirt, affects weariness, her style at odds with the sexualized figure of the blonde ingénue or pinup model in other images of her early acting and modeling career in the 1950s. This other unadorned Loden channels androgynous beatitude, a certain nonchalance of expression, an attitude both diffident and modern. The scene in these photos is disarming in its styled yet unstyled nature, and its quotidian, almost clandestine location. The photos’ lack of pretense, as if snapshots of a domestic scene, signal one part Off-Off-Broadway theater with a dash of “true grit”.

One specific photo in this set won’t let the speculative faculty rest. In it, Loden poses between the wall and the exposed beams, sitting in profile, her body and arms laid forward onto a piece of wood, eyes shut in momentary repose. The scaffold of the exposed wall behind her frames the image, as if a blank canvas, or a film screen. Her closed eyes seem a kind of refusal, a look away, a look within, a resistance to be looked upon, some kind of forbearance. How does a young actor

signal such a combination of world-weariness, ordinary fatigue and self-regard? The scene feels reflexive, contemplative, a mining of Loden's capacity to summon absorption, to perform inward-directed emotion before the camera – as if a rehearsal of her ultimate character, Wanda Goronski and that figure's tamped down affect, her downcast eyes, her folded up being, her self-abnegation.

To speculate here on this image, we project forward to that other juncture in Loden's career, which this photo itself didn't yet divine as a future, but to which it incontrovertibly points. It aims ineluctably towards the project that takes these fatigued gestures and converts them to the story of a woman's refusal of what seemed the only arrangement possible for a viable existence, to write an indelible history of an inchoate feeling not yet given its proper discursive frame.

*“that passive and numb”*

Loden's film, coming on the heels of those compromised acting roles of the late 1960s, was a refusal of another order, in which she seized the means of production for her own ends. She called *Wanda* an “anti-movie,” a film antithetical to the romanticized coupling of *Bonnie & Clyde* (1968). Describing her style in relation to a developing cinematic new wave, and her distaste for “slick pictures,” she suggested in an interview that the “Hollywood albatross” had sunk, “the ship out of lead...won't float anymore.”<sup>14</sup> This statement also suggests an unabashed abjuration of the cinematic mode associated with her then husband Elia Kazan.

Loden gained funding from “family friend” Harry Schuster, to produce her almost decade-old script, based on that newspaper story. Made on 16mm and blown up to 35mm, the film was shot by cinematographer Nicholas Proferes, who had previously worked under filmmakers associated with direct cinema, such as Ricky Leacock. The remaining actors were drawn from a pool of local nonprofessionals. A four-person crew included Loden, Proferes, an assistant, and the actor and lead, Michael Higgins, who played Mr. Dennis. Loden shot the film over six weeks in northeastern Pennsylvania and Connecticut. Describing her aesthetic decisions, the small scale of the shooting and its work, Loden linked this work to the reproductive labor of the housewife,



It wasn't that I knew what I wanted – it was that I knew what I didn't want, all those overdone clichés. It was like being a housewife. You do everything, you don't differentiate. I swept the floor, got the costumes together, dressed the sets. I don't want to get into the system as it exists, I want to create my own corner.<sup>15</sup>

This corner is rendered in the artisanal labor of the film's style, palpable in its naturalistic textures, focus on unvarnished mottled surfaces, 16mm grain, and hand-held cinematography. The film's naturalism is also grounded in its attentive relation to the lived realities of a classed existence. *Wanda's* opening shots track slowly, laterally across Scranton area coal mounds, surveying a landscape of extraction. A cut to an establishing shot of a house, dirty rugs hanging off the porch, a dog running out, and then a profile image of an old woman handling a rosary, as if a photograph from Walker Evans' depression era portraits or Robert Frank's photojournalistic *The Americans*, strikes with the incontrovertible milieu of rural deprivation. Inside, we see a crying child, alone, crawling on all fours through mussed sheets on an empty bed, a woman bleary with the measures of a time spent on reproductive labor, as she holds the baby and her husband rushes out the door, muttering. We see a figure on the couch, lying under a sheet, hiding from the noise and the pressure of the environs of childrearing, the domestic scene, undergirded with banal violence, the working-class decor of "slow death" as Lauren Berlant has described, the process of the wearing out of populations.<sup>16</sup>

The mute figure that lies wearily facedown, her blonde hair in a top-knot pigtail, messily shagging her forehead, as her hands hold her forehead, here appears Wanda: this buried, inelegant, crumpled up woman, this shielded face unable to tolerate the details of this impoverished existence and its demands. So begins *Wanda*, as Loden's direction insists, doggedly, on the unglamorous, the rumpled, the worn down, the extracted. Wanda is reviled, in Loden's own words. The spectator concedes in this moment three minutes into the film, that Wanda is, as Barbara Loden has herself described it, a burdensome figure. She is--and she carries--a heavy load.

Loden frequently spoke with a bracing frankness when describing the character, "Wanda has no direction. She's just passing through life, mainly from man to man. But it's not a woman's film or a woman's problem. Wanda is an object,

something handled, dropped. That's the story."<sup>17</sup> Loden's words strike for their plain recognition of a dehumanizing abstraction, an alienation produced through the alchemy of gender oppression within economic privation. But they also describe something palpably material, the sensorial weight of the force of being and subsisting in this wretched life for a woman who has no resources or supports. What holds her up? The materiality of Loden's description meets the descriptive claims of the film itself in its handling of its corporeal and spatial materials, carving their injunctions into its images.

The sense of Wanda's burdensome weight is also forcefully visible throughout the film, in Loden's construction of her character. Wanda's destitution is quick and merciless. After Wanda's stop at divorce court, she falls swiftly into an encounter with a man at a bar who buys her a beer. Drifting, her aimless search for attachment is driven by transactional needs, forged out of immediacy – having little money for a drink, and no roof over her head, she acquiesces to a night with a stranger. The film judiciously cuts between the scene of the Rolling Rock on the table, Wanda's forehead in her hands registered in weary profile at the window of the diner, to the morning after in the wood-paneled motel room and messy sheets, as the travelling salesman sneaks around and out of the room, as Wanda sleeps. [Figure 3, Wanda at the diner] An accidental noise wakes her; she springs out of bed, sensing her abandonment taking place. This scenario of contaminated use is a humiliation endured in process, played largely straight and cruel; in its pace and editing it elides any romance, seduction or pillow talk that might suggest anything other than instrumentality, the person of Wanda made visible as an "empty space" or placeholder that accommodates male desires and needs.<sup>18</sup>

[Figure 4]

Nevertheless it contains, in its bruising descriptiveness, the slightly tragic sense of the caper. As Dirk Lauwert suggests, "Wanda is a grandchild of Buster Keaton, all the more so because we are unable to laugh (the Buster Keaton handicap)."<sup>19</sup> Wanda scrambles, in torn lace underwear to dress and to catch up with this new yet reluctant companion. She barely gets a ride. He tricks her into getting him ice cream, as we watch in long-shot, as the car drives off, Wanda is left for good, again a jettisoned object in the dreary parking lot, as the car rides off. Wanda stands holding an ice cream cone, which we presume was meant for him. It would be far too

facile to see her abandonment here as some fatalistic reversal of her prior actions. Instead, Loden shows us Wanda's doggedness. We see her effort of surviving *through*, of life as enduring, rendered through such moments of excruciating humiliation, of the most painful rejection – witnessed without expository buffers or redemptive salvos.

Loden avowedly avoids feminist models of representation as social or political correction, if we follow the critique Chuck Kleinhans directs at the film in his contemporaneous review, as he writes that we see Wanda only “results” and not “root causes” of her oppression.<sup>20</sup> The film presents the inverse, alternate image of feminist documentaries like *Janie's Janie* (1970) and *The Woman's Film* (1971) which sought ways to build forms of consciousness through the construction of an introspective, analytical, and ideologically critical autobiographical voice through the narration of first-person subjects in front of and for the camera.

Wanda's relative muteness, her silence, what Loden called the “non-verbal” quality of the film, is paramount to understanding its subtly incendiary, and I would suggest *descriptive* politics. Refusing a diagnostic stance, the description of the character's passivity may feel as it did to Kleinhans, as lacking a “complexity, only the recording of actions and details, “ as he further states, “this type of film easily takes the surface of things, takes the ‘reality’ presented as sufficient, and in the last analysis it usually accepts the world as it is.”<sup>21</sup> The reduction of description to an acceptance of the world as it is rather than inscribed by a refusal marks a difference in reading and aesthetic sensibility about what the cinematic image does and does not do for and with politics. As if a response to such critiques, Loden described her sidelong relation to feminism, in that the “picture was not about women's liberation. It was really about the oppression of women or people.” When asked if she thought her film should present solutions, she continued, “it should be enough for an artist to present something as they see it.”<sup>22</sup>

What the film clearly presents or describes is the very incapacity – economic as well as characterological- that Wanda's silence portends. Wanda does not have the resources, in all senses, for a discourse about herself and of herself. In *Wanda* and *Janie's Janie*, we have two images of women looking into mirrors at themselves, but they signify radically different conclusions about the possibility of recuperating social reproduction as a determinative aspect of women's social and subjective identities, as

well as the possibility of self-scripting at all. [Figure 3A + 3B, *Wanda & Janie's Janie*.] What *Wanda* trades off of the early feminist documentaries' self-consciousness and forthright activism, it converts into an acute observational precision, an observation of a woman's strike – a withdrawal of the only labor she was bidden to do, maternal and care work as a housewife. Gestural and observational details sear an imprint, figuring the concrete conditions and temporalities of a life lived in stagnation, and in the absence of that voice that could or would narrate its self-recognition. Wanda's dereliction of her wifely and motherly station lands her literally in a no-place, where she must again barter and re-negotiate her utility and value, her ongoing survival.

Discursively and aesthetically, a literal reduction to objectness haunts descriptions of the film. The object of female objectification meets the object as trope of weight, tripled in meaning in relation to cinema's capacity to render the objectal qualities of bodies, surfaces, materials. Kazan -- interviewed shortly after Loden's death by Marguerite Duras, herself an advocate of the film--stated that Wanda, was like "a character we have in America, and who I suppose exists in France and everywhere, that we call *floating*, a wanderer. A woman who floats on the surface of society, drifting here or there, with the currents."<sup>23</sup> While this characterization itself seems gendered, coming from Kazan, in the sense that it describes a frivolous person who is weightless, one with some measure of individuated autonomy, a more forceful figuration appears elsewhere: McCandlish Phillips in the *New York Times*, describes the main character, as she "abandons her family and drifts, like a piece of wood, caught on a slow tide, through dreary events in motels and bars."<sup>24</sup> This recalls a figure of waste. Loden refers to her past self, when her life only indicated that she would take the same path as Wanda, that she was an "undead," a "wasted person" had she stayed in rural North Carolina.<sup>25</sup>

### *Gestures of Folding, the Downcast Gaze*

Many critics have discussed the ways Loden was acting as herself, or through her experience in combination with her Method training, summoning some aspect of her own impoverished upbringing in the rural south, living in the zone of the diegesis that resembles the biographical - channeling her own experience, acting as reenacting.

Loden herself frequently indicated the film had semi-autobiographical elements. However, the over-emphasis on these elements of her role seems at time a wishful form of conflation, as if the truthfulness or meaning of one layer of this gesture requires the other biographical history to make it real or to give it force. As Adrian Martin and Cristina Alvarez-Lopez note, this biographical projection in some sense diminishes Loden's ingenuity, her skill and her labor, making of her brilliant performance a kind of diorama of trauma, of the summoning of a volcanic personal catharsis, in which some authentic past self is staged. It might be more productive to ask what Loden's performance *does*: how does her diffidence and her corporeal habitus in the film occupy the tension between acting and directing (both the scene and oneself)?<sup>26</sup>

Wanda the character has clear affinities with the European art cinema, which Loden admired. But rather than the potential eco-hysterical psychologization of Monica Vitti in Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1962), who exhibits similar "symptoms" in relation to a landscape of extraction and patriarchal demand, Loden's Wanda proffers affect before emotion, the facticity of pained presence before symptomatology or the pieties of causality. The anti-psychological cast of Loden's rendering of the character of Wanda opens onto a different way of reckoning with the sense of time given by silence, passivity, the non-agentic. Talking about Antonioni's cinema, Loden stated that "I think Antonioni's films are beautiful, I love watching them, but I never understand the women in them, I never feel a kinship with them"<sup>27</sup>

Evaluated alongside developments of underground and independent cinemas, Loden's performance, its Bressonian subtlety and sharpness, appears to contemporary eyes quite modern. Compared to the hypoactive energies of Cassavetes's actors in his *Faces* or *Husbands* in which actor's performances are an extrusion of emotional force, or the loquacious, listless erotics of actors in the late Andy Warhol/Paul Morrissey films, Loden leverages her corporeal realism towards exploring passivity itself, a tamped down emotional register, as well as a hesitation and unsureness, a reticence to articulation.

The scene during which Wanda arrives in divorce court exhibits this tendency, as Wanda's tardiness and her sullen demeanor are tempered by the impetuosity of her smoking. The cigarette marks an attempt at spacing apart, holding in abeyance her breath in the demand of the judge for her account of herself, even as we know she has

already been spoken for and judged a deserter. Her cautious stepping forward and her refusal to speak provides the specific conditions and eventuating circumstances of her withdrawal. When she finally speaks, "If he wants a divorce, just give it to him; they [the children] are better off with him," Wanda's claim is for a resignation, a recusal of herself from the scene.

Dirk Lauwert reading this moment, sees in it a complex layering of a relation between performativity and documentation. He writes,

When Wanda enters the courtroom – slow is not the appropriate adjective to describe her manner – she is summoned to extinguish her cigarette. She takes a step to the right in order to deposit the cigarette in an ashtray, then sticks her right hand into the pocket of her pants. The three phases carefully flow into one another, three phases in which the workability of the fundamental outline is put to the test. The interweaving immediately becomes a small, but gripping enunciation, expressed with unyielding, obstinate material. That step off to the right, that cigarette, the dust puffing out of that pocket, the shirt hanging out over the pants, the hair curlers under her scarf – Wanda lets herself be documented: the document is the domain of the recalcitrant subject matter. With Actor's Studio techniques, Loden and her 'props' are played against one another, but the final ensemble is never disclosed. Instead of rich, lavish acting, this is gaunt, concentrated focus on what one might be able to do.<sup>28</sup>

Lauwert describing the austerity of elements Loden works with to build the character, clearly makes material of Wanda's status as obdurate and recalcitrant subject, its "small gripping enunciation" leading towards "what one might be able to do." A possibility without a future. The notion that Wanda "lets herself be documented" connects with the question of a refusal, to both be read and the very specific withdrawal, of reproductive labor, so searingly here performed. "What one might be able to do," the potentiality and nascency of Loden's managing of "gaunt" gestural economies.

Rather than seeing her passivity as political aporia, the film's aesthetic articulates the politics of acute description as a tool of exposure, exposing without exposition. This acuteness is itself a form of affective recognition, a divining rod of

shame, a shame that is both described and wielded, by Loden, by Wanda, by characters who mark Wanda's insufficiency as "no good." "I'm just no good," is (for that matter) a statement that she repeats, like a mantra, and the resignation of an ordinance. But in the giving up and giving in to this adjudication, and even as it seems to merely describe a scenario, Loden's acuity of performance reveals a quality of exposure and a scalding plainness of dehumanization at work in Wanda's relations to and with the unremitting world of patriarchy and law.

Wanda's corporeal presence is defined by a series of gestures that recur, making that element of shame a rhythmic, poetic and postural motif. The film revolves around corporeal folds and foldings: when we see her under the sheet hiding from the dreariness of her sister's home, when she folds her head in her hands at the diner, her empty purse on the table, the beer she has been bought in the other; when she washes her face in the bar bathroom, resting her entire face in her hands, bent over on the sink, even as Dennis yells at her from the bar; when she lies in a fetal curled up position between Mr. Dennis and his unwilling accomplice, as they plan a bank robbery Wanda has no desire to participate in. Even as his accomplice describes his ambivalence, Wanda's only zone of expressivity is a refusal she cannot vocalize, but can only embody. This shrinking and curling inwards, this crumpling of her body into a state of defensive withdrawal, suggests a character whose sense of space, as Alvarez-Lopez and Martin suggest, has contracted, a world which she struggles to occupy or belong in. But further, Loden's registration of Wanda's incommunicative hurt comes in these moments as a physical withdrawal, a strike, not unlike the withdrawal of her care labor, in another register, of another sort.

[Figure 5 – Wanda's corporeal involution]

Wanda's body (as was Loden's) is also the site of regulation and consternation. Mr. Dennis who takes over the task of adjudicating Wanda's worth and value, finds her appearance untoward. She is insufficiently feminine, bordering on slovenly. From their first meal, where he tells her to wipe her mouth, on to her policing of her clothing and hair, when he demands she wear dresses and tells her to get a hat to cover her hair, all enact the demand of patriarchal looking relations as the vocalization of an irascible loner and loser, whose dominion over Wanda registers as absolute. Like his distaste for the "garbage" of onions and butter on a burger, Dennis' commands limn the toxicity of masculine privilege, converting them into aesthetic

claims on Wanda's body. As Reynaud suggests, Mr. Dennis's demands reduplicate Loden's whole life of actress as woman playing a part, as treatise on the labor of acting, of being for another and appearing for another.<sup>29</sup> This is *Wanda's* brutality and also its insight, an agon of instrumentality.

Wanda's reactions however are extraordinary. In them Loden materializes the character's subtle impetuousness and unruliness, an almost childlike interdiction. Wanda's enjoyment is largely erotic, bound to orality and the alimentary; she attempts to touch Dennis and gets reprimanded, after they have had sex. She also eats with gusto: the scene with the pasta, as Wanda keeps a diner open to sop up the sauce with the last remnant of bread speaks to her lateness as well as the alternate pace of her enjoyment. "Don't you like that? Isn't that the best part?" she asks an intemperate Dennis.

Wanda's hair is also a key element of her performance, what Lauwert characterizes as Loden's maneuvering of the props and set pieces that build her comportment. The topknot ponytail has the air of jaunty contingency, the juvenile impetuousness of a marionette. When Dennis tells Wanda to get a hat, she says she has no money for one. He calls her stupid, and tells her that if she doesn't want anything she will never have anything, "You're not even a citizen of the United States, you're dead." "I guess I'm dead then," Wanda replies. Reduplicating the script of her devaluation, the irony of this assertion returns to the sense of the materiality of description in the writing and performance of Loden's character. What Wanda re-states is a description that has become her branded value. This figure of the "undead" of the loaded, burdensome Wanda, is also tied to the film's complex sense of time.

#### Wanda's *Slowness*

"We immediately see a different relationship to time... In *Wanda*, everything remains *en suspens*, Loden's shots begin a bit too soon, last a bit too long. . .

Dirk Lauwert, 2007

Wanda is moving and moves us because her movements are mistimed, belated: she is always late, she oversleeps, she can't catch up. This delayed state is the condition of her unbelonging in the normative times of sociality. The sweatshop boss who fires her



and steals from her wages justifies his actions by flatly remarking, “You’re just too slow for sewing operations.” Wanda’s slowness in terms of narrative time throws a wrench in the works, or at least she thinks it does, in the big bank heist that Dennis plans. She arrives late to the event, having gotten lost – her non-utility, inefficiency is both marvel and tragedy, a deliverance and an ineluctable, material refusal. That obduracy and recalcitrance at the level of performance and at the level of narrative enacts a distinct denouement.

It is hard not to watch *Wanda* and not see the defining tropes and gestures of contemporary slow cinema – both at the level of performance of passive affect, but also in the flatness, observational realism, an attention to the specificity of place, worn, timorous and unvarnished landscapes, but minus the epic pictorialism asserted by Tarr, Sokurov or Ceylan. Loden instead works in a minor key and in a reduced scale. Her images render an image not from a perspective of a temporal or spatial totality, but from a partiality of material and lived experience, a partiality that is as much about a partial, incomplete view as it is about a downcast or reduced gaze, performatively.

Loden’s aesthetic choices seize the spectator in their seeming unaffectedness. Vistas are never wide, mid-shots and tight close-ups prevail, and when distant framings are present, like in the opening slag heap scene, the embedding of Wanda in the image contracts the possibility of a feeling of ease and mastery, of an effortless flow through and in the image. Movement is slow, pained, labored, stuttering or halted, belated or late. Much of the framing and the performative work of the film’s observation locates Wanda’s body in relation to a space that remains delimited, a register of blockage. Even when Wanda and Dennis are seen against a scenic view, when they stop the car and reshuffle their possessions, the camera refuses an expansive scanning or panoramic regard towards landscape. The camera does not rove beyond the characters or assert a grandiloquence of potentiality. Perhaps the most hopeful moment of unblemished feeling and authentically joyous expression in the film, when Dennis yells and chases the toy airplane as it buzzes overhead, strikes as an instance of misplaced scale. The smallness of the plane, a child’s toy as something that intervenes momentarily in the opaque inner life and imaginary of these two reticent, bruised characters. The plane enters into the contracted universe of their world, into their frame, and the possibility of some kind of freedom is tensed against

the absurdity of the scene, of Dennis' irascible, childish response, an index of the failure of their navigation of the world's adult rules and codes.

The film's gesturing to narrative conventionality also provides an element of temporal distension, as the narrative events feel like a lot of waiting, in between, liminal time. Dennis and Wanda hide out in hotels, carry bags to the car, sit in diners, drive headachey without visible vistas, enact movement, go in circles, without progression or telos. Once the film shifts to its "heist" narrative, or rather "anti-heist" narrative, it is as if the aspirations towards narrative eventfulness are deflated, filmed at the same descriptive pace as that time of waiting. There is no heightening of tension, or the construction of shots that winnow into a crescendo through montage. The scene unfolds with the same observational pace, and as Lauwert suggests the "en suspens" of the film's time rests on this sense of an "action film without action."<sup>30</sup>

Thus, rather than modulating slowness at the level of the unit of the shot or the take, Loden's articulation of slowness seeps into varied aesthetic components, but also signals it as a narrative, formal and political "problem." It is perhaps too schematic to suggest that discourses on slow style privilege the bombast of the sweep of a camera, the durative stare of a stationary camera, or the attentive capaciousness of intimacy that in all instances has a feeling of expansiveness, ongoingness, and flow.

The opposite is the case with Loden's style, in that her images are highly bounded and their sense of temporality is constructed vis a vis a sense of closing off or of the unsustainable, of expiration. In the final image of the film, in which Wanda sits, defeated, having seen the news of Dennis' death on television at a bar and narrowly escaped a rape, now surrounded by merriment and life, smoking a cigarette as a party of strangers drink, play music, and carouse around her, the space of the image remains contracted, arrested, jammed by Loden's performance at the center of the image, smoking, on automatic, lost in the gesture of repetition. Rather than the epic mode, the minor key models this movement inward, an involution, at once a postural code and a condition of diminution.

[Figure 6, Wanda in closing]

*Slow cinema's blind spot*

To the extent that the debates around cinematic slowness have both drawn attention to the political potential of cinema's formal features and emphasized the materiality of the body, they have studiously circumnavigated questions of the body with respect to sexual difference. To this end, Karen Redrobe in a response to debates regarding cinematic tempo, argues that many of the scholars working on fast and slow cinemas have given, "little attention to the intersecting histories and legacies of feminist, queer, and third cinema engagements with cinematic tempo."<sup>31</sup> Following on Karl Schoonover's call to consider the queer potential of cinematic slowness, and its revaluation of value, *Wanda's* aesthetic force reminds us of the necessity to return to gender's constitutive role in our understanding of cinematic temporalities.<sup>32</sup>

*Wanda's* refusal of reproductive work and her assent and acquiescence to the existing terms of women's transactional existence, in which her body is literalized as a zone of devaluation, exploitation, sexual value extraction – oscillates between use and non-use. While discourses of corporeality frequently make their way into discussions of slowness's political and aesthetic import, such accounts of materiality tend towards materialist, ecological or localizing claims.<sup>33</sup> And while sexual politics and questions of sensation are frequently summoned, in relation to specifically queer directors such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Tsai Ming-liang as one dimension of slow style, these same examinations of embodied and felt time in accounts of slowness frequently avoid discussion of female sexuality, gender and histories of social reproduction and its refusals.<sup>34</sup>

Slow cinema's discourse on human and non-human agency, telos, historical progress, and materiality might be productively placed alongside women's cinemas and modes of film practice not ordinarily associated with the formal austerity of slow works. This relocation or redirection through the histories and margins of women's cinema, and via *Wanda*, also yields a different set of implications for the articulation of alternative temporalities, belated arrivals, obduracy, and deceleration – returning us to the criticality of what Julia Kristeva long ago mapped as "women's time."<sup>35</sup> Such renditions of slowness as opened up by *Wanda* are historical, social and affective as much as they are about formalist aesthetic categories that tends towards metrics – the duration of extended takes, the rigor of distant framings. *Wanda's* politics of slowness rests in its emphasis on the valuation and recognition of a woman's experience, its failures, dead ends, and ambivalences, and of the oppressive demands to perform for

another, rather than oneself. Loden converts such questions into a precise aesthetic and set of descriptive strategies. Through inhabiting such conditions of instrumentalisation, Loden insists on the importance of sharing the cinematic time and traction of this woman's mode of life, its specific temporality and materiality, as existential struggle in its own right. Loden reminds us that the experience of duration in cinematic forms is felt through and fundamentally tied to the embodied nature and endurance element of gendered performance labor. Loden's masterwork confronts the spectator with the performative effort and labor of gendered being, in the temporal endurance of precarity without respite.

In thinking corporeal cinema through an analytics of the body's micro-temporalities and its gestural economies, we enter the sphere of the passive, the inarticulate, the insignificant, the fatigued, the obtuse; into the enduring insignificance of *Wanda*. A double notion: *Wanda*'s enduring insignificance as film historical object, which has in turn led to a reconstituted life of surviving, precisely through and due to its legacy of marginality; and as that narrative ode to living in and through the minor temporality, inside that smallness. It is without question that Loden's own legacy in the figuration of fatigue, labor and the imaging of distressed and extracted landscapes has taken root among leading contemporary directors, such as Kelly Reichardt, Valeska Grisebach, and Chloe Zhao, women working in this observational idiom in the twenty first century. Their deployment of an attentively durational austerity belies the impress of genealogies that link back to *Wanda*'s claim on the ordinariness of refusal's obdurate temporalities. Barbara Loden's *Wanda* has become radically contemporary, a film made for a feminist future, that has perhaps belatedly arrived. Hanging her head in that strange repose of mute passivity, Wanda is a woman whose plainness and ubiquity, whose stuckness, obstinacy and slowness, opened out onto an unforeseen, untimely feminist cinema; forsaking a labor devalued and unremunerated, her strike finds at last its audience in solidarity, across the reaches of historical time.

<sup>1</sup> "Barbara Loden Revisited", Loden interview with Madison Women's Media Collective, *Women and Film*, Vol. 5-6, (1974): 69.

<sup>2</sup> Dirk Lauwert, "Wanda," *Sabzian*, March 2018, trans. Mari Shields. <  
[http://www.sabzian.be/article/wanda#footnoteref4\\_insj5qx](http://www.sabzian.be/article/wanda#footnoteref4_insj5qx)>

Originally published in *A Prior* 15 (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Thomas, "Miss Loden's *Wanda*: 'It's Very Much Me'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 8 1971, G1, G17.

<sup>4</sup> Lauren Rabinowitz, "Medium Uncool: Women Shoot Back; Feminism Film and 1968--A Curious Documentary," *Science & Society*, Vol. 65, No. 1, (2001) 95.

<sup>5</sup> Loden worked on varied projects in the 1970s after *Wanda*, and had planned to make a film version of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*; she made several educational films including *The Frontier Experience* scripted by Joan Micklin Silver. She also continued to work in the theater.

<sup>6</sup> An effusive revival has emerged in conjunction with some limited DVD distribution in the US and Europe, and a recent restoration of a print of the film by the UCLA Film Archive. In the digital age, the film has circulated via ripped versions on YouTube, and a Janus Films re-release in July 2018 also portends a restored re-release on Blu-Ray with the Criterion Collection. New admirers, from Isabelle Huppert to Agnes Varda to Rachel Kushner to Don DeLillo, have emerged, and old advocates, such as Marguerite Duras have been re-discovered. Don DeLillo, "Woman in the Distance," *Guardian*, November 1, 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/nov/01/wanda-barbara-loden> An impending theatrical run in Summer 2018 and restoration is also on the horizon, recently announced by Janus Films. On the restoration of *Wanda* by UCLA preservationist Ross Lipman, see Mike Dillon, "Shades of Grey: An Interview with Ross Lipman," *Spectator* 32: 1 (Spring 2012). 45-53; *Wanda* Screening announcement, UCLA Film Archive, March 19, 2011 <<https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/events/2011-03-19/wanda-1970>>.

<sup>7</sup> See Marguerite Duras and Elia Kazan, "Conversation on *Wanda*," Marguerite Duras interview with Elia Kazan, *Cinema Comparat/ive Cinema*, Vol. 4, No. 8 (2016), 12-13; (originally published in *Cahiers du Cinema*, 2003, 1980.) <http://www.ocec.eu/cinemacomparativecinema/index.php/en/33-n-8-english/446-conversation-on-wanda-by-barbara-loden>; Isabelle Huppert, as told to Geoff Andrew, "Wanda," *Sight and Sound*, Vol 25, No. 10 (October 2015): 24; Judit Karacsony, "Fictions and Realities: On the Margins of Barbara Loden's *Wanda*" *Americana*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2014) <http://americanajournal.hu/vol10no1/karacsony>

<sup>8</sup> Nathalie Leger, *Suite for Barbara Loden*, London: Les Fugitives, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Weinman, "The True Crime Story Behind a 1970s Feminist Cult Classic", *Topic* Issue 4, (October 2017) <https://www.topic.com/the-true-crime-story-behind-a-1970-cult-feminist-film-classic>

<sup>10</sup> Rex Reed, "Watch out for Barbara's *Wanda*," *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 1971. 52.

<sup>11</sup> Reed, 52.

<sup>12</sup> Berenice Reynaud, "For *Wanda*," in Thomas Elsaesser, eta led. *The Last Great American Picture Show*, Amsterdam University Press 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> McCandlish Phillips, "Barbara Loden Speaks of the World of *Wanda*," *New York Times* (March 11, 1971) p.32.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Thomas, "Miss Loden's *Wanda*: 'It's Very Much Me,'" G17.

<sup>16</sup> Lauren Berlant. "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)." *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 754-80.

<sup>17</sup> Phillips, 32.

<sup>18</sup> Don DeLillo, "Woman in the Distance," Originally published in *The Guardian*, November 1, 2008, (Rights expired). Transcribed here: <http://kinokorner.blogspot.com/2008/11/woman-in-distance.html>

<sup>19</sup> Dirk Lauwert, "Wanda." np.

<sup>20</sup> Chuck Kleinhans, "*Wanda* and *Marilyn Times Five*: Seeing through Cinema Verite," *Jump Cut* <<https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC01folder/Wanda.Marilyn.html>> (Accessed January 20, 2018) Originally published in *Jump Cut* no. 1, 1974, pp. 14-15,

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> "Barbara Loden Revisited," 68.

<sup>23</sup> Marguerite Duras with Elia Kazan "Conversation on *Wanda*," Originally published in *Cahiers du Cinema*, June August 2003, from 1980 transcript. In *Cinema Comparative Cinema* <<http://www.ocec.eu/cinemacomparativecinema/index.php/en/33-n-8-english/446-conversation-on-wanda-by-barbara-loden>>

<sup>24</sup> Philips, 32.

<sup>25</sup> Loden, quoted in Thomas, G17.

<sup>26</sup> Adrian Martin and Cristina Alvarez Lopez, "Nothing of the Sort: Barbara Loden's *Wanda*" *Cinema/Comparative Cinema*, 2016 [full cite]

<sup>27</sup> Madison Women's Collective, "Barbara Loden Revisited," *Women and Film*, Vol. 5-6 (1974): 69.

<sup>28</sup> Lauwert, "*Wanda*".

<sup>29</sup> Reynaud, 241.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Karen Redrobe (Beckman), "The Tortoise, the Hare, and the Constitutive Outsiders: Reframing Fast and Slow Cinemas," *Cinema Journal* Vol. 55, No. 2, (Winter 2016): 125-130.

<sup>32</sup> Karl Schoonover, "Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema's Laboring Body, the Political Spectator and the Queer," *Framework*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Spring 2012), 65-78.

<sup>33</sup> See for example Tiago De Luca on sensorial cinema, *Realism of the Senses in World Cinema*, London: IB Tauris, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Consider the varied books and collections thus available in terms of their attentiveness to histories of women's filmmaking. While *Slow Cinema*, Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, eds. Edinburgh University Press, 2015, includes chapters on Kelly Reichardt and Lucille Hadzihalovic among its entries, and discussion of Daniele Huillet, the bulk of the framework considers male auteurs. Even more glaring in its lack of female directors is Ira Jaffe's *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action* New York: Wallflower Press, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Women's time." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no. 1 (1981): 13-35.